

Minority Media as Intercultural Dialogue: A Communicative Praxis

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Introduction

My task is to attempt an analysis of minority media in terms of its potential for intercultural dialogue in our societies, drawing primarily on the UNESCO World Report on *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue* (2006). My aim is ultimately to show that the communicative aspect of such intercultural dialogue is the accentuation of democratic citizenship in multicultural societies. Conceptually, I use the term 'minority media' expansively, to refer more to a way of practicing journalism in intercultural settings than to any institutional structure of media. I thus see minority media as a typology of media that has a minority orientation in its editorial policies and makes good on that orientation. What this means is that I treat all media types – mainstream and alternative – as possibilities for minority-sensitive journalism or reporting. I recognise the fact that minority media can, and do, exist as such. But my approach is not so much about creating 'niche' media for minorities as advocating for a re-sensitisation and re-orientation of existing media forms to integrate minority cultures within their editorial practices and routines. To this end, I structure my paper as follows. Firstly, I justify the need for minority-sensitive media as a key element in the struggle for intercultural dialogue against the backdrop of the tendency towards cultural homogenisation typical of mainstream media. Secondly, and by way of conclusion, I proceed to sketch what I consider to be the key normative communicative roles for minority media.

The case for minority media: towards a journalism of cultural belonging

Why, then, is the issue of minority-sensitive media so important in a multicultural setting? I would like to make three key arguments, namely: (i) the increasing recognition of minorities in international human rights discourse; (ii) their continuing poor media representations; and (iii) the democratic potential of minority discourse in multicultural settings. I discuss each of these points in turn.

Minorities in international human rights discourse

To take the first one: Minorities in international human rights discourse. The 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (also referred to as the United Nations Minorities Declaration) set out an international legal framework for

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recognising and protecting the rights of persons belonging to minorities (United Nations 2010: 1). In the UN system, there is a recognition that the work by Francesco Capotorti, Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities (1979), reignited the spark of minority discourse, drawing special attention to minority rights (Aikio-Puoskari & Skutnabb-Kangas 2004: 60).

For its part, the United Nations Minorities Declaration refers to national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity as constitutive of minorities. The existence of a minority is a question of fact, and any definition must include both objective factors (such as the existence of a shared ethnicity, language or religion) and subjective factors (including that individuals must identify themselves as members of a minority) (in United Nations 2010:2). This approach generally agrees with that preferred by Aikio-Puoskari and Skutnabb-Kangas, who define a 'minority' as:

A group which is smaller in number than the rest of the population of a State, whose members have ethnic, religious or linguistic features different from those of the rest of the population, and are guided, if only implicitly, by the will to safeguard their culture, traditions, religion or language ...

To belong to a minority shall be a matter of individual choice (Aikio-Puoskari & Skutnabb-Kangas 2004: 66).

Writing within the US national context, Larry Gross extends this definition to include 'ethnically and racially defined people as well as to women (in terms of their relative powerlessness despite their numerical superiority)'. He points out that these descriptive categories are 'defined by their deviation from a norm that is white, male, heterosexual and (in most western societies) Christian, and these deviations are reflected in the mirrors that the media hold up before our eyes'. Minorities, he goes on, share a common media fate of relative invisibility and demeaning stereotypes. He is quick to point out that there are differences as well as similarities in the ways in which various minorities are treated by the mass media. It is because of these differences in the conditions they face in our society that the effects of their media images are different for members of the various minority groups (Gross 1998: 89).

In general, then, both national and international definitions of the term would appear to lend themselves to objective and subjective criteria, whereby the Deaf, for example, can legitimately be classified as a minority (Aikio-Puoskari & Skutnabb-Kangas 2004), and so can a multiplicity of linguistic communities, as is the case with the Baatombu in Nigeria (see, for example, Kperogi 2006) and the Baswara in Botswana. Indeed, such a definition can be extended to include lesbian women and gay men (Gross 1998: 89).

In this regard, international human rights law seeks to achieve four key objectives, namely to: (i) secure the survival and existence of minorities, (ii) promote and protect their identity,

(iii) ensure equality and non-discrimination of minority groups; and (iv) enhance effective and meaningful participation of minorities in public affairs (United Nations 2010: 7-13).

This scope of protection of minority rights is reflected across a whole regimen of international treaties and agreements, such as:

- The 2001 Durban Declaration, which affirms that ‘the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of minorities, where they exist, must be protected and that persons belonging to such minorities should be treated equally and enjoy their human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination of any kind’.
- The 2001 UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which encourages the production, safeguarding and dissemination of diversified contents in the media and global information networks, including promoting the role of public radio and television services in the development of audiovisual productions of good quality.
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which enjoins upon States Parties to guarantee that the rights enunciated therein will be exercised without discrimination of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.
- General comment No. 14 (2000) of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on the right to the highest attainable standard of health, which states that health facilities, goods and services must be within safe physical reach for all sections of the population, especially vulnerable or marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities.
- The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage provides safeguards and promotes the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the associated instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage.
- The 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which emphasises the importance of the recognition of equal dignity and respect for all cultures, including that of persons belonging to minorities, and of the freedom to create, produce, disseminate, distribute and have access to traditional cultural expressions (United Nations 2010: 14-18).

It is evident, then, that there is no need for additional norm-setting. What is important is to raise greater awareness about these instruments among media development actors, including media owners, editors, journalists, journalism educators and media policy-makers. We need to concentrate on better interpretation and more effective implementation of

existing norms, particularly those relating to the promotion and protection of the human rights of minority groups.

Media under-representations of minorities

This takes me to the second aspect of the case for minority media: Media under-representations of minorities. Without belabouring the point, there is ample evidence to prove that minorities receive the least and most negative portrayals in mainstream media. Of course, we must recognise how the international and national media landscapes have dramatically altered. As the UNESCO World Report on *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue* (2006: 18-19) observes, recent years have seen the transnationalisation of global multimedia corporations, many of them dominated by the OECD countries. The report goes on to note similar trends regarding the origin of content production in the radio, television and film sectors. In the case of cinema, the general trend is that of national productions struggling to compete with the blockbuster films produced by large movie conglomerates.

The vast majority of developing countries is still not in a position to harness their creative capacities for development in this sector, although intra-African trade in films produced by Nigeria's Nollywood shows the extent to which the African film industry is beginning to have resonance across the continent, contributing to what the UNESCO report refers to as 'counter-flows' in global information. Such 'counter-flows' are illustrated by the rapid increase in developing countries' exports of cultural and media equipment between 1996 and 2005 as a result of strategies to increase global competitiveness and an expanding demand for communication equipment. This trend facilitated the emergence of local markets for media contents, though those markets remain fairly localised due to technological limitations and distribution difficulties (UNESCO 2006: 18-19).

Furthermore, the report concludes, the development in media exports from newly industrialised societies, the rise of new regional media hubs, the global significance of the Latin American audiovisual sector (*telenovelas*) and the rise of pan-regional/international news networks are visible signs of a 'globalization from below', which is creating new opportunities for alternative voices (minority, indigenous, diasporic communities or special interest groups) to be heard (UNESCO 2006: 18-19).

In general, however, the extent of minority penetration in international and national media outlets is still severely limited. Where it occurs, it does not reflect effective and meaningful participation by minorities, leading to what the UNESCO report refers to as a 'false diversity', masking the fact that a significant majority of people is still interested in communicating only with those who share the same cultural references (UNESCO 2006: 18-19). Moreover, the limited range of representations in the larger national media and communication networks tends to promote the creation of stereotypes through what is often called the process of

'othering', whereby the media fix, reduce or simplify according to the dictates of standardised programmes and formats. Such media representations may serve to reinforce the power of vested interests and exacerbate social exclusion by excluding critical or marginalised voices, which usually belong to the category of 'others' (cf. Van den Bulck & Van Poecke 1996: 159; Branston and Stafford 2003).

This process of mediated 'othering' can perhaps be better illustrated by Camilla Nordberg's study of how two of the largest Finnish and Swedish newspapers represent the Roma, a minority ethnic group. She concludes as follows:

The narrow agenda on Romani issues covered in the Finnish press reproduces the familiar image of the Roma as outsiders, as entertainers, criminals and victims ... This construction is underpinned by the lack of Romani representatives debating discrimination in the press. There is also a surprising shortage of feature stories recognizing the Roma not only as representatives of a collective ethnic identity, but as individual citizens with multiple identities triggered in different settings... (Camilla Nordberg (2006:100).

On a more optimistic note, Nordberg argues that the shift towards more specific critical statements and the emphasis on empowerment from within could perhaps create an opportunity for increasing dialogue between a larger group of Roma and the state apparatuses about how to implement and transform those social and cultural rights which already exist in the form of legislation (Camilla Nordberg (2006:100).

Minority discourse as democratic intercultural dialogue

This leads me to the third element in justifying the case for minority-sensitive media, namely that minority discourse can act as democratic intercultural dialogue. From what I have set out so far, it is clear that minority discourse calls attention to the discursive practices associated with the reality of mediated marginalisation of minority groups and their attempts at self-empowerment through an alternative cultural narrative. A key feature of that minority project is to identify and expand a particular neutral setting or space for democratic dialogue with and within minority groups. In this regard, the UNESCO world report is instructive. It argues that:

'Intercultural dialogue is largely dependent on intercultural competencies, defined as the complex of abilities needed to interact appropriately with those who are different from oneself. These abilities are essentially communicative in nature, but they also involve reconfiguring our perspectives and understandings of the world; for it is not so much cultures as people – individuals and groups, with their complexities and multiple allegiances – who are engaged in the process of dialogue' (UNESCO 2009: 9).

As a communicative ability, dialogue has its problems, of course. As Cees Hamelink (2004: 29) helpfully reminds us, dialogue requires the capacity to listen and to be silent. But, he goes on, learning the language of listening is very hard in societies that are increasingly influenced by visual cultures, filled with ‘talk shows’ and no ‘listen shows’. As such, Hamelink concludes, the essence of dialogue could and should be taught in the early stages of people’s lives in school, at home, and through the media.

As a feature of democratic (minority) discourse, (intercultural) ‘dialogue should be seen not as involving a loss of self but as dependent upon knowing oneself and being able to shift between different frames of reference. It requires the empowerment of all participants through *capacity building and projects that permit interaction without a loss of personal or collective identity*’ (UNESCO 2006: 10) (my emphasis).

Within this interpretive framework, we can perhaps better appreciate why the UNESCO Constitution calls upon its Member States to promote ‘the free exchange of ideas and knowledge’ as well as to develop and increase ‘the means of communication between their peoples and to employ these means for the purposes of mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other’s lives’ (UNESCO 2004: 7-8).

Branston and Stafford (2003: 90) reinforce this observation when they remind us that the media ‘give us ways of imagining particular situations, identities and groups. These imaginings exist materially, as industries which employ people and can also have material effects on how people experience the world, and how they in turn get understood, or legislated for, or perhaps beaten up in the street by others’.

This, then, constitutes the case for minority-sensitive media. But how can they be appropriated as communicative praxis in an intercultural setting? Let me move on then to consider this question.

Minority media as communicative praxis

Arguably, minority discourse can be appropriated as communicative praxis to stimulate informed dialogue about cultural co-existence. To this end, UNESCO is targeting minority-sensitive reforms in media and pedagogical practices. For example, through capacity-building, we can encourage news media to develop and apply minority-sensitive editorial guidelines, reflecting the campaigns currently being implemented by organisations like the Minority Rights Group International – a non-governmental organisation (NGO) working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples worldwide and to promote cooperation and understanding between communities (Taneja 2009). We can also engage journalism educators to introduce intercultural competencies into their curricula. Indeed, these two approaches are the subject matter of UNESCO’s project called ‘**Reporting on the other**’. Through this project, UNESCO will be working with

news media and journalism education institutions across the globe to integrate within their professional practices elements of cultural diversity.

The theoretical motif for such an intervention derives from the UNESCO world report, which offers a tripartite analytical framework for appropriating minority discourse as intercultural (dialogic) communication (UNESCO 2006: 9-10). The framework encapsulates the 'ways in which cultures relate to one another, awareness of cultural commonalities and shared goals, and identification of the challenges to be met in reconciling cultural differences' (UNESCO 2009: 9). As part of what some scholars refer to as the 'circuit of culture', news media and journalism education are interpenetrated in the cultural moments of production, identity, representation, consumption and regulation (DuGay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus, 1997). As such, the communicative aspect of minority discourse entails treating news media and journalism education as part of that communicative-cultural nexus which can be enlisted in cultivating the kinds of democratic values and practices that can enhance cultural diversity. In this regard, three key normative communicative roles can be identified for minority media actors, namely: (i) facilitating cultural interactions; (ii) unmasking cultural stereotypes and intolerance; and (iii) forging a common narrative.

Facilitating cultural interactions

To take the first element: facilitating cultural interactions. I see journalism and journalism education as critical to this process of cultural interactivity. Minority-sensitive editorial policy guidelines and journalism curricula could incorporate the fact that the 'intermingling' of dominant and minority 'cultures throughout history has found expression in a variety of cultural forms and practices, from cultural borrowings and exchanges to cultural impositions through war, conquest and colonialism'. Critically important is the fact that 'even in the extreme circumstance of slavery, exchanges take place whereby certain discreet processes of reverse enculturation come to be assimilated by the dominating culture – a form of cultural 'counter flow'. Recognition of the universality of human rights, along with respect for cultural diversity, has made it possible today to think in terms of genuine exchanges on the basis of equality between all the world's cultures (cf. UNESCO 2006: 9-10).

Minority-sensitive editorial guidelines can help break down the barriers that often discourage and/or distort intercultural conversations. By interacting more with minorities, the often dominant-cultural inhibitions that define the operations of mainstream news media institutions could weaken, facilitating the emergence of a responsive and interactive professional culture that can accommodate minority representations. Journalism education, for its part, can set in motion a long-term process of educational conscientisation that could lead to critically minded graduates, able to interrogate the stereotypical assumptions of dominant cultures in the newsroom.

Unmasking cultural stereotypes and intolerance

A necessary consequence of cultural interactivity could probably be the unmasking of cultural stereotypes and intolerance – which is my second point. Minority discourse attempts to unmask cultural stereotypes which serve to ‘demarcate one group from the alien “other”’. But more importantly, minority discourse, as democratic intercultural dialogue, seeks to negate the risk that dialogue may stop short at difference, which may engender intolerance.

As the UNESCO world report observes, most ‘intercultural tensions are often bound up with conflicts of memory, competing interpretations of past events, and conflicts of values ... Where it has not been excluded by the will to power and domination, dialogue remains the key to unlocking these deep-rooted antagonisms and to pre-empting their often violent political expressions (UNESCO 2006: 9-10). Here, the news media, using their investigative capacities, are better placed to play a key role in unmasking any stereotypical hindrances to meaningful and effective dialogue. A particularly important role for journalists and journalism educators is to work towards reconciling ‘the recognition of, protection of and respect for cultural particularities with the affirmation and promotion of universally shared values emerging from the interplay of these cultural specificities’ (cf. UNESCO 2006: 9-10).

In this regard, a related capacity-building strategy to eliminate stereotypes could include media and information literacy. As the UNESCO world report advises us, such an initiative can help audiences to become more critical when consuming media and also help to combat unilateral perspectives. It is ‘an important aspect of media access and a crucial dimension of non-formal education; it is imperative that it be promoted among civil society and media professionals as part of the effort to further mutual understanding and facilitate intercultural dialogue’ (UNESCO 2006: 9-10).

Forging a common narrative of cultural pluralism

This leads me to the final point: forging a common narrative of cultural pluralism. The UNESCO world report observes that divergent memories have been the source of many conflicts throughout history. It goes on to argue that, although intercultural dialogue cannot hope to settle on its own all the conflicts in the political, economic and social spheres, a key element in its success is the building of a shared memory base through the acknowledgement of faults and open debate on competing memories. The framing of a common historical narrative, the report claims, can be crucial in conflict prevention and post-conflict strategies, in assuaging ‘a past that is still present’. The report then cites South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the national reconciliation process in Rwanda as recent examples of the political application of such a healing strategy. The showcasing of ‘places of memory’ – such as the Robben Island Prison in South Africa – is key to this process (UNESCO 2006: 9-10).

Arguably, news media and journalism education institutions constitute legitimate 'places of memory'. As cultural institutions, they can help a society to learn about and remember itself, shaping the understanding of values, customs and tradition to build a sense of community. By forging a common cultural-pluralistic narrative – one which builds bridges between the 'we' and the 'other' without obliterating or frowning upon difference – they can contribute towards affirming minority presence and agency in society. They can provide an inclusive and democratic platform for every group in society to gain visibility and be heard. By the same token, the media can engender suspicion, fear, discrimination and violence by strengthening stereotypes, fostering inter-group tension and excluding certain groups from public discourse.

Conclusion

In this paper, I addressed the need for minority media, setting them out as a key plank of intercultural dialogue. Firstly, I set out the case for minority-sensitive media, justifying them in terms of the increasing recognition of minorities in international human rights discourse, their continuing poor representations in the media, and the democratic potential of minority discourse as intercultural dialogue. Secondly, I proceeded to appropriate minority discourse as communicative praxis, sketching three key normative communicative roles for minority media actors. These are: facilitating cultural interactions; unmasking cultural stereotypes and intolerance; and forging a common cultural-pluralistic narrative.

Ultimately, to speak of minority media as intercultural dialogue is to affirm the important idea that all free, independent and pluralistic media have the potential to cultivate democratic citizenship in intercultural settings. To paraphrase Peter Dahlgren (2000: 321-322), who refers to the 'empirical dimensions' of civic culture, minority-sensitive media can help us all in:

- (i) Providing an inclusive, pluralistic public sphere for imparting relevant (intercultural) knowledge and competencies to citizens;
- (ii) Inculcating loyalty to (intercultural) democratic values and procedures and thus cultivating civic virtue (participation, solidarity, tolerance, courage, etc.);
- (iii) Personifying the practices, routines, traditions associated with democratic (intercultural) citizenship; and
- (iv) Fostering the construction of the kinds of plural identities associated with democratic citizenship.

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